

'Strategic clarity, every day great execution'

Harish Manwani, Unilever Asia and Africa president and chairman of Hindustan Unilever, is no stranger to awards. But this one was special. On Wednesday, he bagged the CNBC Asian Business Leader of the Year award, edging out, among other contenders, the head of the world's largest carmaker, Toyota. In a telephonic interview from Singapore, he spoke to Ravi Srinivasan about the award, Unilever and the key factors which make for great leadership. Excerpts:

You have received many awards in the past. What makes this one different?

First, it is a recognition for the company and its people. After all, I'm not the owner or the founder of this business – I'm a professional manager. In that sense, the award's recognition for the Unilever team in Asia. We have been recognised not just as a global company but as an Asian company.

Is it also a sign that the 'old economy' fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector is back in favour?

(Laughs). This is a question I get asked often. There's an India context and there is an Asia and a global context to this. Globally, FMCGs are very much the flavour of the season. Globally, investor confidence in the FMCG sector is strong, since it is relatively more immune to cyclical changes in the economy. In an Asian context, it's all about sustained performance over a long term.

How do you sustain long-term performance?

Great companies have legacies in which they intrinsically build strong capabilities to continuously build strategies for the long term, while ensuring sustained profitability and growth in the short term, to ensure that we survive into the long term. We do that with the help of strong brands, which are continuously invested in, organisational values, which are the same whether it's the UK or South Africa or India, and what I call the 'magic factor' – fine local talent. About 95 per cent of our staff is local in any market we operate in. We are very strongly rooted locally, and this gives us the ability to understand local consumers and the envi-

Q&A

Harish Manwani,

Asia and Africa president & chairman, Hindustan Unilever



ronment better.

Is there a formula for success?

The 'hardware' of success is about the ability of a business to have foresight – a 'point of view' about the future. The second is strategic clarity – the ability to make sharp choices. And the third key is operational excellence – everyday great execution. The 'software' is leadership. Great leaders have to be 'bifocal' – have long-term vision, while ensuring sustained performance in the short-term.

Your definition of leadership?

A key element is the ability to build people around you, nurture top talent, which will eventually become bigger than you. That's what separates good leaders from great ones. There are no 'cookie cutters' for leadership. You have to be authentic, be yourself and be consistent – both to your organisation's values and your own.

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